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AUTHOR Healy, Michael P.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended for use by Idaho educators in implementing courses to meet that state's new composition requirements for high school students. Following a brief overview of the new requirements, the major section of the guide presents information about class size, teacher qualifications, and materials needed for the courses. The role of spelling and grammar and the amount of required writing are also discussed. The third section offers suggestions for course content, including types of both practical and academic writing, while the fourth deals with teaching the writing process, including the prewriting, writing, and postwriting stages, and evaluation. A final section presents lists of resources for the teaching of writing. (FL)

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TEACHING COMPOSITION:

Guidelines for teachers of the Required Composition Course in Idaho High Schools

1979 Edition

IDAHO STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Division of Instruction
Boise, Idaho

Prepared by:

Michael P. Healy, Wood River High School
Niki McCurry, Boise State University English Department
Driek Zirinsky, Idaho State Department of Education

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Dr. A. D. Luke
Associate State Superintendent
Division of Instruction

Mr. Jerry L. Evans
State Superintendent
of Public Instruction

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Prepared by:

Michael P. Healy, Wood River High School
Niki McCurry, Boise State University English Department
Driek Zirinsky, Idaho State Department of Education

Cover design by:

Patricia A. Axtell, Borah High School

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I. Overview: The New Composition Requirement and the High School Program

Beginning with the graduating class of 1982, Idaho high school students will be required to complete a one-semester class, or its equivalent in time, in composition during the last two years of the high school curriculum. This guide will suggest ways to implement the new requirement. Some schools will find that courses they already offer fulfill the new requirement, while others will have to modify the existing curriculum to meet the new requirement.

During the meeting of the State Board of Education on February 3-4, 1977, the minimum number of semesters required in English for high school graduation was increased to seven (3 1/2 years). Of the seven required semesters, one semester credit must be earned in composition during the last two years of high school. The Board adopted the following definition of the required composition course:

> Composition: A course designed to improve each student's writing skills through structured practice and guidance. Composition should emphasize syntax, word usage, grammar, organization and semantics with the intent of enabling the student to express his or her thoughts in a clear, logical manner. Course shall include student work with several styles and kinds of writing. This course must be taken by the student in his or her last two years of high school study.

In Addendum to Accreditation Standards and Procedures for Secondary Schools 1977, published by the State Department of Education, the following statement was made describing the purpose of the composition course:

> The purpose of the required composition course is to develop and refine students' ability to write, particularly to prepare them for the post-high school writing demands they will face. One semester, or its equivalent, must be taught during the 11-12 grades.

A primary reason for the new requirement was to increase the emphasis on writing in the English program. Although all students will now take at least one semester's course, or its equivalent, devoted to writing, writing should continue to be a regular and important part of every English course or class. In a literature class, for instance, students should write both personal responses and critical pieces about the works they read and discuss.

In addition, writing should occur in every subject on a regular basis; writing is not the province solely of English. An important goal for improvement of writing is that students write a sustained piece of writing every school day in some class. In all English classes, about 1/4 to 1/3 of the time should be devoted to writing and to writing-related activities.

II. Some Questions and Answers about the Composition Course

A. Will one course fulfill the new composition course graduation requirement?

It is a reality that a wide range of writing ability exists among students. Typically, students in the eleventh or twelfth grade will already have achieved some competence in written expression and will have already passed the writing section of the state basic skills proficiency test by the time they enroll in the composition course required for graduation.

There is no one single course of study that will satisfy the needs of all students. Composition classes must be highly individualized to assure that students get the help they need, and to assure that all progress in writing ability. Some schools may offer students the choice among different writing classes while others will prefer small heterogeneous classes. Good arguments can be advanced for both patterns of organization.

If separate classes are offered, criteria for admission must be made clear to students. Generally, in establishing different composition classes, both writing ability and student's future plans should be considered in determining course content and admission. This guide will outline two course patterns: one course to meet the needs of those students whose skills are advanced and/or who intend to enroll in college; and one for those with less writing skill, and/or who intend to enter the job market or the military immediately after graduation.

The distinction being made between the two courses is an artificial one made for descriptive purposes. Great care should be taken in developing courses which meet the present and potential writing needs of students. Interest and ability should be considered in assigning students to a composition class.

Because the State Board has mandated that the "purpose of the required composition course is to prepare them (students) for the post-high school writing demands they will face," careful attention should be paid to the post-high school intentions and activities of students in the current and past senior classes in each high school when the courses are being designed.

B. Can creative writing or journalism fulfill the graduation requirement?

Each school district must answer this question for itself, and the answer must be based on the following considerations:

1. The class must meet the spirit and the letter of the State Board requirement in composition.

2. The class must follow the guidelines set out in this document.

Generally speaking, few schools in Idaho offer courses in creative writing or journalism which can meet these expectations. However, some individual teachers have designed courses in journalism and creative writing which do meet the guidelines and it is possible to develop other classes which do so.

In general, journalism classes which devote time to the production of a school paper or yearbook cannot be considered composition courses. Those which have built a curriculum soley around experience with all types of journalistic writing, which devote some time to writing longer and more formal pieces, and which exist primarily to increase writing ability may be considered composition courses.

Similarly, creative writing classes which are offered for composition credit, must provide the range of writing experiences, including expository writing, discussed in this guide.

Schools which offer alternatives to a composition course should provide guidelines for students indicating who may be eligible for the alternate course and stating all prerequisites for the class. In addition, detailed course descriptions must be available for students and others.

Journalism and creative writing classes continue to be considered appropriate electives for English credit within the required seven semesters, even if they do not fulfill the graduation requirement in composition. In addition, some assignments typically found in journalism or creative writing classes are appropriate to be included as part of the composition course.

In the final analysis, the high school accreditation process will determine whether classes offered do meet the state requirements.

C. How many students should be in a composition class?

The National Council of Teachers of English recommends that writing classes have no more than 20 students in them and that a full teaching load not exceed 100 students per day. Successful teaching of writing requires individual attention. There is no question that if the class is too large, quality will suffer.

D. Who should teach this composition class?

This course, one which can raise the quality of writing throughout the school program, may be one of the most important offerings of an English department. The selection of the teacher or teachers for the composition classes should be the first teaching assignment made, not the last. It would be desirable for the writing teacher to hold a masters or fifth year degree, to be familiar with practical and personal uses of composition, and to have had personal writing experience.

These qualities are desirable in a composition teacher:

1. Interest in teaching writing.
2. Willingness to spend the time needed to read and evaluate student writing.
3. A major endorsement in English.
4. Course work in both advanced expository composition and in methods of teaching composition.
5. Personal experience as a writer.

E. What materials should the school provide for the writing class?

A writing text is not necessary for each student. In fact, anything resembling a workbook approach should be avoided. However, it is essential that each teacher have resource materials at hand. An annotated bibliography of recommended materials appears in Part V of this guide.

F. Should grammar be taught in a composition class?

Yes, of course. For all writers, clarity of expression and respect for writing conventions are important. These are the goals of grammar instruction. Having passed the competency test, students should be able to demonstrate mastery of standard grammar and usage in their writing, but review and reinforcement may be a part of the course. The overwhelming bulk of the work and emphasis, however, must be on actual writing, not on grammar exercises.

The purpose of studying grammar in the composition course is the immediate and practical application of grammatical standards to the students' own writing. As a guideline, a maximum of one day out of every five may be spent teaching grammar. The errors that students make in their own writing should form the basis for deciding what grammar is taught, and such grammar teaching should be individualized. It is inappropriate to work through a grammar text in this class.

G. What about spelling?

Conventional spelling is important in communication. By the junior or senior year in high school, students should be responsible for the spelling in their finished work. Teachers should be responsible for making sure that:

1. Students are aware of the need for correct spelling in finished work.
2. Students know techniques for correcting misspelled words such as using dictionaries, carrying word lists, and getting help from teachers and peers.
3. Students who have a serious spelling problem be provided an individualized remedial program.

H. How much should students write in the composition class?

Students in a composition class should write in class, every day. In fact, most class time in a composition class should be spent either in writing, in reading and discussing the writing of peers, in brainstorming ideas for writing, in conferring with teachers or other students or in editing or proofreading activities. Though students should be asked to write every day, some of the writing will be in rough draft form or be "free writing" exercises which need not be corrected by the teacher. The section in this guide discussing the writing process will provide more information to clarify this statement.

Students should keep a file of all the writing produced in the class, from which they may select, polish and submit for evaluation by the instructor final, carefully polished pieces of writing. As a guideline, 10 to 15 papers of this kind can be expected in a semester. These 10 to 15 polished pieces of writing should be of varying length, depending on the purpose of the assignment, ranging from one paragraph to several pages in length.

There is not time for the 20 page "term paper" in the composition class. However, the suggested activities listed in Section III of this guide include shorter papers which do require reference to printed sources and their documentation in the paper. Students will benefit more from having practice with many types of writing than from spending most of the semester on one paper.

III. Suggested Content for Composition Classes

A. Practical Writing

Juniors and seniors who are only moderately skilled writers and who have no plans for further education will benefit from a carefully planned composition semester that is oriented toward practical and personal writing needs.

Though each school will want to develop its own statement of purpose, in general terms the course should aim to:

- develop fluency of written expression,
- provide intensive individual assistance to developing writers,
- provide a wide range of writing experiences to each student, and
- teach students to become effective editors of their own writing.

We can help our students express themselves adequately and confidently in the following typical writing situations. For the semester, at least, the students should become "writing citizens," and the specific writing assignments given should spring as much as possible from immediate, practical situations.

SUGGESTED TYPES OF WRITING	PRACTICAL USES OF THE FORM	SOME ASSIGNMENTS
A. Reports	Minutes of a meeting; letter to editor; news report or news release; accident report; summary of a reading assignment.	Police accident report using an actual form; student council minutes; coverage of a city hall meeting for a newspaper; written form of report to be given orally in another class.
B. Personal narrative	Human interest news report; letter to friend; autobiography for an application; journal entry describing an event.	Family history; pen pal letter; diary; fictionalized account of a trip; autobiography; memoir about a family member or friend; fiction.
C. Analytic approaches		
1. Identify problem and propose solution	Job improvement suggestions; propose a school policy; letter to editor; persuasive writing.	Proposed solutions to school or community problems; suggestions for improved efficiency at a job; supporting a candidate for a school or community office; helping a friend analyze and solve a personal problem.
2. Cause and effect	Evaluations of books and movies; scientific observations; understanding current events.	Determining and substantiating reasons for personal response to a film, book, or a TV show; interpreting cause and effect in scientific experiments or historical events.

SUGGESTED TYPES OF WRITING	PRACTICAL USES OF THE FORM	SOME ASSIGNMENTS
3. Comparison and Contrast	Consumer choices, personal decision-making.	Evaluation of competitive products; weighing career alternatives; deciding among candidates.
4. Process Analysis	Giving directions; analyzing how things are done.	How a bill becomes a law; directions for travel; how to cook, how to repair, and how to make something.

* For additional ideas, consult the Idaho Curriculum Guide, Language Arts K-12, and the resource books listed in the bibliography of this guide (pp. 14).

B. Academic Writing

Students who have developed in writing ability beyond basic writing skills and who plan on continuing their education have the same writing needs as the previous group and more. The following typical writing situations of this more academically orientated group are different, but the writing they do will often include the types of writing of the previous group. Students in this group are capable of developing longer papers, perhaps averaging ten paragraphs, and they should be able to write 5 to 6 paragraphs in one class period.

Though each school will want to develop its own statement of purpose, the general aims of this course are:

- to develop fluency of written expression,
- to provide intensive individual assistance to developing writers,
- to provide a wide range of writing experiences to each student, and
- to teach students to become effective editors of their own writing.

SUGGESTED TYPES OF WRITING	PRACTICAL USES OF THE FORM	SOME ASSIGNMENTS
A. Report	Note-taking; summaries; minutes of meetings; news reports (eyewitness); paraphrasing.	Summarizing a book or article; presenting different points of view on the same contemporary issue; giving an eyewitness account of a local event.
B. Personal Narrative	Letters; autobiography and memoir; journal entries; fictional narratives.	Writing stories based on personal experience; family or town histories; autobiography; keeping a writer's journal; writing letters.
C. Analytic Writing		
1. Problem and solution	School, community, and national concerns analyzed and solutions proposed; developing inventions to meet a need; proposing school curriculum revision.	Narratives to accompany science and mathematics problems; proposing solutions to a pressing community problem; using research to propose several alternate solutions to a national problem.
2. Cause and effect	Presenting and interpreting results of scientific experiments; library research for investigation of causes; sociological analysis.	Recording observations and interpreting the results of scientific experiments; discussing long-term effects of historical events or decisions; analyzing motivation of real or fictional personalities.
3. Comparison and Contrast	Separate fact from opinion; comparative analysis of literacy works, cultures, two presidents, foreign policy decisions; evaluating relative merits of career options or consumer products.	Showing similarities and differences in periods of history, personalities, scientific exploration, or works of literature; determining relative merits of compared entities;weigh- career alternatives.

SUGGESTED TYPES OF WRITING	PRACTICAL USES OF THE FORM	SOME ASSIGNMENTS
4. Process Analysis	Giving directions, explaining how to do or make; explaining abstract processes.	How a bill becomes a law; how tides function; interpreting group dynamics.
5. Definition	Defining, classifying; clarifying.	Exploring the meaning of abstract terms; classifying works of literature by genre and period; explaining concepts in math or science.

IV. Teaching the Writing Process

When students are working on any particular writing task, there are stages of the writing process which must be followed. Sufficient class time and appropriate conditions must exist for students to complete each stage.

The Pre-Writing Stage:

The first, or pre-writing stage, involves getting an idea for writing and exploring that idea. Before writing begins, classes, smaller groups of students, and individuals need time to generate ideas on an assignment or topic. Pictures, a reading selection, a film, or a recent event may provide a starting point for writing. Through discussion, brainstorming, listening to each other, free writing, or jotting notes, students may formulate, share, and explore ideas for doing the writing task. The teacher plays a key role in this process by allowing time for this stage which may appear on the surface to be aimless. However, any writer knows that simply receiving an assignment does not assure the ability to start writing. The time to explore before writing is essential to the quality of the final product. At times, especially at the beginning of the course, teachers may want to assist students in this process.

The Writing Stage:

The next, or writing stage, is the most familiar step. Writers write. The stage is inherently a private one during which the writer chooses from, organizes, and begins to write down the ideas generated in the pre-writing stage. The time needed for this stage will vary from writer to writer. A teacher's role during this stage is to organize the class to allow sufficient time and resources for writing, which may include providing individual help to students who require it. At the end of the writing stage, a student will have produced a rough draft.

The Post-Writing Stage:

Much of value to a developing writer can occur during the time after completing a rough draft.

Initially, the post-writing stage is a time for sharing the first draft. This may occur between two students, a small group of students, with teacher and students, or with a teacher. The focus for the sharing should be a general discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. In particular, the discussion should center on what the writer was trying to accomplish and how well he or she succeeded. Recommendations on how to correct weaknesses can be important elements in this discussion. The focus should be on substantive aspects of the writing, including effectiveness of communication in light of purpose and intended audience, and overall structure of the piece.

After sharing a rough draft, a paper may be revised or filed in the student's writing folder to be held for possible future polishing. If a paper is being polished, a correcting or editing stage should follow revision. Editing can be done by individuals, pairs or groups of students, or by the teacher. The purpose of this step is to catch and correct mechanical errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammatical agreement, and paragraphing.

Depending on the intended use of the paper, or it's importance to the writer, the revising and editing stages may be repeated more than once for a given composition.

Evaluation:

The preceding section has clearly suggested that "evaluation" is part of the revision process and it involves students at every step.

Evaluation of writing by a teacher can take many forms, but a distinction should be made between correcting and grading, and responding and commenting. Responses made during a conference or in writing are necessary feedback for any piece of writing and they should focus equally on overall strengths and weaknesses of the paper. They should deal with how well the writer has succeeded in meeting intent. Correcting of superficial, mechanical features as suggested in the preceding section is an important, but different stage in the revision process. Correcting in this sense should never be the only element of teacher evaluation. Assigning a grade is a necessary <u>part</u> of the evaluation process, but should be accompanied by the broader responses suggested above. A teacher may "correct" a paper before it is returned for revision, and "grade" it after the revision is complete.

V. Resources for Teaching Writing

The list of resources which follows is by no means a complete listing of every book available on the subject of teaching writing. It is a suggested, basic collection for teachers of composition.

It is recommended that the set of resource materials listed below be provided for composition teachers in lieu of texts for students. Starred items are recommended as "essentials", if only a few items can be purchased. A few of the titles should be provided for each teacher of composition in the school; others can be purchased for a departmental library.

Resources for Teaching Composition

Beach, Richard. Writing About Ourselves and Others. ERIC/RCS and NCTE, 1977. (Stock No. 58838R, $1.95 [$1.40])

A brief practical presentation of activities which build skills leading to the writing of an autobiography, a memoir, or a portrait. Each teacher should own a copy.

Clapp, Ovida, ed. On Righting Writing. NCTE, 1975. (Stock No. 06854R, $4.75, [$2.50*])

Thirty-four brief practical articles by successful writing teachers describing techniques that work in teaching writing appear. Divisions are: Getting the Writer Started, Finding a Subject, Developing Point of View, Sensing an Audience, Sharpening Technique, Writing and Clarifying Values, and Exploring Writing Systems. A helpful, practical resource which can be easily shared by several teachers.

Cooper, Charles R. and Lee Odell. Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging. NCTE, 1977. (Stock No. 16221R, $5.75 [$4.50*])

The title is an accurate description for the collection of articles which, define "evaluating writing" in the broadest possible sense, describe approaches to evaluation which can be used by individual teachers and by departments to measure growth and progress in writing. This book is a must for every English department.

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. (Paperback $1.95)

A well-known advocate of innovative teaching methods outlines a practical program for learning to write. The book is particularly helpful in suggesting ways to separate the productive and editorial processes, and in suggesting how the class or groups of students can react productively to one another's writing. This book will be of practical help, but is also very good reading.

Emig, Janet. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. NCTE, 1971. (Stock No. 08032R, $4.25 [$3.10*])

This monograph has come to be regarded as a classic case-study analysis of the processes students go through when they write. Teachers will also be interested in a section in chapter 1 which discusses accounts by established writers of their own writing processes. Every knowledgeable teacher of writing should be familiar with this study, and it is suggested that a copy be made available for each English department.

Gueder, Patricia and others, eds. They Really Taught Us How to Write. NCTE, 1974. (Stock No. 54220R, $4.95 [$3.95*])

Teachers of winners of the NCTE achievement awards in writing describe how they teach writing. The articles are brief and practical and many of the ideas will be fresh and imaginative to most teachers.

*Gunther, Deborah and others. Writing: A Sourcebook of Exercises and Assignments. Menlo Park, California: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1978. (Paperback $6.00)

Sixty exercises and assignments are set out in lesson plan format and cross-indexed by writing skills taught, and level of difficulty. A whole course can be built around these plans, or a teacher could selectively pick certain lessons. A section giving ideas on handling the paper load is of particular help. This book is highly recommended; every teacher will find something of use in it. A novice can use it as a course outline for academic or for practical writing students.

Hillocks, George Jr. Observing and Writing. ERIC/RCS and NCTE, 1975. (Stock No. 33967R, $1.50 [$1.25])

Observing closely and writing descriptions using detail effectively are important writing abilities. This pamphlet presents 15 specific activities for developing this skill. Every teacher will find this publication useful.

*Koch, Karl and James M. Brazil. Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process. NCTE, 1978. (Stock No. 47518R, $3.95 [$3.40])

A collection of twenty-nine writing strategies written in lesson-plan format and described by the authors as being "...practical, involving, student-centered, simply implemented." We agree and highly recommend this book for every composition teacher.

Laque, Carol Feisa and Phyllis A Sherwood. A Laboratory Approach to Writing. NCTE, 1977. (Stock No. 25573R, $4.50 [3.95*]) 135 pages.

Offers teachers methods and a theoretical base for experimenting with the teaching of writing in a laboratory classroom situation. The approach features multiple options and is suited to an individualized approach. The emphasis is on the writing process and the stages of pre-writing, controlling a thesis, development through evidence and rhetorical strategy, editing, and evaluation. An excellent book, it is recommended for the experienced teacher of advanced students.

Long, Littleton, ed. Writing Exercises from "Exercise Exchange." NCTE, 1976. (Stock No. 59079R, $4.50 ($3.25*)

This collection of 56 essays presents the best of the "Writing Exchange", a newsletter for and by teachers of writing. The articles are all practical in orientation and have been used successfully by the author. The book is a useful source of ideas and can be shared by several teachers.

*Moffett, James and Betty Wagner. Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976. (Hardback: $15.95)

This excellent curriculum guide goes far beyond outlining a one-semester composition program. However, individual teachers can make good use of suggested approaches and assignments, and the work as a whole can help English departments fit the composition course into the total 9-12 sequence. Every English department should have a copy of this book.

*Murray, Donald. A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1968. (Paperback: $7.95)

Murray's book gives English teachers an effective method of teaching composition based on the experiences of professional writers. The processes of writing and the processes for teaching writing are presented in a parallel format with a wealth of practical ideas and examples of student writing and teacher responses. This work is a must for every beginning or experienced writing teacher.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. (Hardback $8.00)

While a teacher of basic writing at The City College of New York, the author analyzed the writing problem of students in her classes and suggested remedies. The book is both scholarly and practical and would be a useful addition to every English department's collection. Anyone who claims to know how to teach writing must be familiar with this work which is already being considered a classic.

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